Activities That Promote Racial and Cultural Awareness

For preschoolers:

Music and Dance
Ask parents to lend recordings of music that their families enjoy. Teach children songs and dances from different nations. Children will begin to see that most people like to sing and dance, but every group has its own special ways of doing it.

For school-age children:

Thumbprints
Set out white index cards, a black ink pad, a pen and a magnifying glass. Ask children to make prints of their thumbs by pressing them on the ink pad and then on the cards. Label each print with the child's name. Let children use the magnifying glass to see how the prints are alike and different.

Listening and Carving
Tell children about Alaskan Inuit artists who like to carve animals from stone. They pick out a stone and sit with it, spending time with the stone and getting to know it. When they know the stone well, they find the shape or animal that the stone wants to become. Then they begin carving the stone. Give each child a piece of sandstone (available in art supply stores) which can be easily carved by rubbing the sand off with a plastic knife. Encourage the children to carry the stone with them for awhile and see if it will tell them what shape it wants to become. Then let them carve their stone.

Proverbs and Traditions
Ask children to talk with their families about sayings that are common in their culture or traditions that they have in their families. Choose one broad topic, such as love, birthdays or holidays. Chart the responses to see how different cultures express similar ideas. Children might also be fascinated to compare the different names they use for their grandparents.

For all ages:

Reach out in your community across racial, ethnic and other barriers. Bring people of other colors and other social and ethnic backgrounds into your world. Invite them to dinner or sit with them next time you are at a school function. Model behavior that treats all people as equals regardless of race, gender, religion or other differences.

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Encouraging Acceptance

Teaching Children To Value Differences

Virginia Coalition for Child Abuse Prevention
c/o Prevent Child Abuse Virginia
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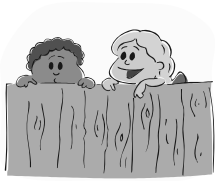
How Children Become Aware of Differences



Children's awareness of others begins with their awareness of themselves. When they are infants and toddlers, they begin to learn "what is me" and "what is not me." By age two they recognize and explore physical differences and as they learn the names of colors, they may begin to apply them to skin color.

During the **preschool years** (ages 3 and 4) children learn to classify and they tend to sort based on color and size. They may not understand that two people with different skin tones can be part of the same racial group. They want to know how people got their color, hair texture and eye shape. They may believe that because other parts of their bodies grow and change, skin color and other physical traits could also change. Because their thinking is limited at this age, it is easy for them to believe stereotypes and form prejudices.

Kindergarteners (age 5 and 6) continue to ask questions about physical differences and can begin to understand the explanations. They are developing social skills and becoming more group-oriented and they may enjoy exploring the culture of their friends. By age 6, most children understand the concept of fair and unfair and they will use these concepts to deal with issues.

During the **early primary years** (age 7 and 8), children can understand how one person can be a member of several different groups – for example, a person can be part of a family, a classroom, a culture and a race. They can also understand feelings of shame and pride and they are aware of racism or prejudice against their own group. They are able to identify with the feelings of others and they are interested in learning about the world. This is a perfect time for giving children accurate information to help them grow out of "preschool" ways of thinking.

As children grow and develop their racial and cultural awareness and identities, we should encourage them to accept and celebrate their differences and similarities. Children with a positive sense of self and others will become adults who accept and affirm differences, identify unfair situations and strive to eliminate prejudice of any sort.

Helping Children See Beyond Stereotypes

Two things help young children learn to be comfortable with unfamiliar things: repeated exposure and connections. To help children feel comfortable with all types of people, make sure they are exposed to them often, in a healthy way, and that they make connections with a variety of people regularly. Here are some things you can do:

- Acknowledge differences in people rather than denying them. At the same time, point out similarities. This will let children know that it's okay to ask questions.
- Examine your own behavior. What do your friends look and sound like? What do you say to your children when you drive through a different neighborhood?
- Pay attention to your own biases, even if they are unintended.
- Watch television with your child and point out some of the stereotypes. Are old people seen as feeble and incompetent? Do girls need rescuing more often than boys do?
- Look for ways your children can interact with people who are different. Invite friends when you have a cultural or religious celebration so you can share stories about your backgrounds and beliefs. Visit ethnic festivals in your community or teach your child to count to ten in another language.
- In your children's school, do learning and problem-solving tasks emphasize cooperation rather than competition? Fostering team spirit can conquer feelings of differentness or separateness that children experience among themselves.
- Act quickly if you hear your child say something that you consider to be sexist, racist or mean. Young children may voice their beliefs or fears to see how their parents respond. If your child makes a prejudiced remark, focus the correction on the words, not the child. ("Just because your new classmate doesn't speak English isn't a reason not to like him. Do you remember how hard it is to learn something new?)